

## The **Job engagement in organizations:** Incubator **fad, fashion, or folderol?**

ANDREW J. WEFALD\* AND RONALD G. DOWNEY

*Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, U.S.A.*

---

**Summary** Engagement, broadly defined as involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm, is widely used by organizations and consultants for improving retention. However, engagement fails to meet many of the common criteria for positive organizational practice, i.e. theoretical, valid, unique, state-like, and positive. With attention to these criteria, engagement may be useful to management. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Introduction

Dunnette (1966) defined fads, fashions, and folderol in the field of psychology. Fads are short-lived ideas that quickly fade away. Fashions are manners or modes of action that become a norm in the field. Folderol are useless ideas that sometimes come in the form of new names for old ideas. An important question is, does job engagement fit any of those definitions or does it deserve to be seen as a legitimate psychological construct leading to important organizational outcomes? This Incubator article will try to address this question.

Job engagement, as a positive concept, is very popular with companies and consultants. As pointed out by Macey and Schneider (2008, p. 3), “The notion of employee engagement is a relatively new one, one that has been heavily marketed by HR consulting firms who offer advice on how it can be created and leveraged.” Further, they note the growing interest in engagement by the academic community. On the academic side, there is a growing level of interest in job engagement as an important psychological construct (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). Although there is some overlap in the definitions of engagement from the academic and industry sides, there are distinct differences in the definitions and especially with how they are used and promoted.

The next sections will explore how organizations are using engagement, the effectiveness of current efforts from a scientific viewpoint, and the degree to which engagement is just the repackaging of old ideas and measures or a re-tooling of these approaches to be more compatible with the needs of organizations. We view engagement as a psychological state of fulfillment with one’s tasks at work.

---

\* Correspondence to: Andrew J. Wefald, School of Leadership Studies, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, 785-341-3276, U.S.A. E-mail: wefald@ksu.edu

However, we also view engagement skeptically, that is, we are not convinced engagement has met any standard of being a distinct and useful construct.

## Industry's Approach

As noted by Macey and Schneider (2008) in their lead article on engagement in *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, most of the approaches used by organizations are somewhat similar in concept and definition, however, the way engagement is measured differs, often dramatically. Macey and Schneider (2008) reported that engagement is often thought of as the opposite of disengagement and that engaged employees contribute more to their organization and are more loyal to the organization. They also noted the confusion between industry and academics regarding the definition of engagement. The industry side focuses on engagement *as* an outcome—an outcome that purportedly can be used to take appropriate actions for organizational improvement. This makes sense because businesses care about outcomes much more than defining and measuring psychological states. A total of 13 commentaries accompanied the Macey and Schneider article. The commentaries are both a testament to the level of interest in engagement and demonstrate the communalities and differences in the area.

Probably the most frequently used and well-known industry approach to engagement was developed by the Gallup organization (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), which defines engagement as an individual's involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work where individuals are emotionally connected to others at work and are cognitively vigilant. Harter et al. found that employee engagement was related to satisfaction and performance at the unit level and suggested the Gallup scale is *actionable*. Vance (2006) reviewed a variety of job engagement programs and summarized industry's approach to engagement by listing 10 common themes in measures of engagement. These included:

- Pride in employer.
- Satisfaction with employer.
- Job satisfaction.
- Opportunity to perform well at challenging work.
- Recognition and positive feedback for one's contributions.
- Personal support from one's supervisor.
- Effort above and beyond the minimum.
- Understanding the link between one's job and the organization's mission.
- Prospects for future growth with one's employer; and
- Intention to stay with one's employer.

The main problem with the various industry approaches to engagement is that, for the most part, they are proprietary and are not normally subject to external reviews. So when a group suggests that their measure of engagement is *actionable*, we view those assertions skeptically since we have no way to examine them.

Industry's approaches to engagement all share aspects of satisfaction and involvement; however, there are also some differences in how engagement is conceptualized and defined. As Harter et al. (2002) suggested (and others have followed suit), engagement is measured slightly different than satisfaction, which allows for more organizational and employee development and intervention—again claims such as these have not been subject to scrutiny and the statistical overlap with satisfaction

has not been examined in the literature. Some research has suggested substantial overlap between satisfaction and engagement (Wefald & Downey, in press).

## Academic's Approach

The most frequently cited academic job engagement measure was developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) who defined engagement as a persistent and positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Schaufeli et al. (2002) see engagement as high energy, resilience, a willingness to invest effort on the job, the ability to not be easily fatigued, and persistence in the face of difficulties. Wefald (2008) provides a summary of the current state of affairs on academic measures of job engagement. Much of this research has been done with student samples and the focus has been on establishing the psychometric characteristics of the measures including structure, reliability, and associations with other job attitudes. However, a very limited amount of work has looked at consequences of job engagement.

### *Comparing academic and industry measures*

While the same name is given to the different measures of engagement within and between industry and the academic community, the definitions and items for the various measures are very different. We were unable to find any published research that directly compares the two types of measures; therefore, it is not known how the two are related. The one conceptual connecting link is that job satisfaction, commitment, and involvement are generally part of the definition and items for the industry's measures and the same constructs have been found by the academic community to be related to the engagement measure (e. g., Christian & Slaughter, 2007). Clearly, there is a need to more fully understand how the two measures (constructs) are connected. To facilitate this comparison we used Luthans, Avolio, Avey, and Norman (2007) set of five criteria for integrating positive psychological constructs into practice. Using Luthans approach, the constructs need to be: (1) *grounded in theory and research*; (2) *valid measures*; (3) *unique to organizational behavior*; (4) *state-like and open to development and change*; and (5) *have a positive impact on performance and satisfaction*. Engagement is popular because it is intuitive and it is common sense both to employees and to management. As was noted above, the structure, definition, methods, and state versus trait aspect of job engagement vary both within and between the industry and academic approaches. There is a need for each approach to develop; (a) a theoretical structure for engagement (Macey and Schneider (2008) made a step in this direction), (b) settle on a consistent definition, (c) develop consistent methodology for measuring engagement, and (d) clarify the state/trait aspects of engagement. While both approaches have provided limited evidence for the value of engagement to organizations, researchers should increase the focus on how engagement can benefit managerial decisions and important outcomes. This will create a market for the findings and this will go a long way toward bridging the gap between the two worlds of academic and organizations. Most importantly, research is needed to explore engagements' connections to other commonly used constructs like satisfaction, involvement, and commitment. More research supporting engagement's construct validity is needed and the degree to which it adds value beyond these constructs. It is clear that engagement has failed to meet many of the criteria suggested by Luthans. These failures should make us cautious about its wholesale use.

One major difference between the two approaches is not covered by Luthans' five criteria. Industry typically uses macro data analysis where responses for individuals' are averaged over a work group or

team and the group or team score becomes the data point. Conversely, academics use an individual's response as the data point. While there are connections between the two types of data, relating the information to other constructs (e.g., productivity) may rest on very different assumptions and different data. If the aggregation approach is used for the constructs to be related to engagement, the results are parallel. If a truly group measure is used (e.g., team production), which is not generated from individual measures, the results can be very divergent. Also, the foci of improvement actions are equally different, the team versus the individual. The macro approach is less concerned with state versus trait issues for engagement since trait differences would be masked within the group data. Discussions in the engagement research have failed to address this difference and how it may impact the results.

## Conclusion

We believe there is a clear delineation between the academic and organizational view of engagement. The organizational view of engagement is clearly focused on the outcomes of a psychological state, e.g., performance, retention, and commitment. Further, managements' focus on macro issues versus researchers focus on individual differences (the micro view) also creates a gap in measurement and other methods. Academic researchers are more focused on the psychological construct itself and how to measure that construct while management is concerned with unit level outcomes (e.g., performance and satisfaction). This is potentially a serious problem. Cascio (2007) referred to the split between academia and practitioners as a difference in "thought worlds." Many ideas that have been well validated in empirical research are not utilized by practitioners simply because the results do not fit industry's perceptions of important outcomes: e.g., job satisfaction predicting turnover. The irony is that job satisfaction is closely linked with (synonymous to) job engagement which has such a high level of acceptance. The gap between academia and practice with engagement must be resolved now, before the separate ideas become entrenched in the minds of both groups. Clearly, the two worlds need to *meet somewhere in the middle*.

Answering the question of whether or not engagement is a sound psychological construct that truly does add something to the field of organizational behavior is something that is a work in progress. Too little attention has been paid to attempting to integrate the two constructs being developed by industry and academics and thus, we need to integrate the measures and methods from the two "thought worlds" (Cascio, 2007). Job engagement seems unlikely to be a fad; given how it has been around for more than a year or two. Right now the jury is still out on the judgment of job engagement as fashion or fad. It clearly has elements of each in its short history in research and application. We hope this article will stimulate others to do the necessary work to effectively answer the many unresolved questions and issues associated with each approach.

## Author biographies

**Andrew J. Wefald** is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Kansas State University in the School of Leadership Studies. His research areas include job attitudes, leadership, personality, and discrimination in hiring decisions. He is currently ABD in the Industrial/Organizational Psychology program at Kansas State University. He has a PhD in Industrial & Organizational Psychology from Kansas State University.

**Ronald G. Downey** is a Professor of Psychology at Kansas State University in the area of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. His research areas include performance appraisal, burnout, engagement, work-family conflict, and occupational health. He also serves as a private consultant to organization in the area of selection, surveys, and performance appraisal.

## References

- Cascio, W. F. (2007). Evidence-based management and the marketplace for ideas. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50, 1009–1012.
- Christian, M. S., & Slaughter, J. E. (2007, August). *Work engagement: A meta-analytic review and directions for research in an emerging area*. Paper presented at the sixty-seventh annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Philadelphia, PA.
- Dunnette, M. D. (1966). Fads, fashions, and folderol in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 21, 343–352.
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business–unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 268–279.
- Luthans, F., Avolio, B. J., Avey, J. B., & Norman, S. M. (2007). Positive psychological capital: Measurement and relationship with performance and satisfaction. *Personnel Psychology*, 60, 541–572.
- Macey, W. H., & Schneider, B. (2008). The meaning of employee engagement. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 1, 3–30.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., Gonzalez-Roma, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 71–92.
- Vance, R. J. (2006). *Employee engagement and commitment: A guide to understanding, measuring and increasing engagement in your organization*. Alexandria, VA: SHRM Foundation.
- Wefald, A. J. (2008). An examination of job engagement, transformational leadership, and related psychological constructs. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.
- Wefald, A. J., & Downey, R. G. (in press). The construct dimensionality of engagement and its relationship with satisfaction. *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*.